

THE TRUE
STORY OF
AH Q · BY
LU HSUN

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
PEKING 1953

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Lu Hsun

(This picture was taken in September, 1930, in Shanghai when the author was fifty years old.)

Lu Hsun's *The True Story of Ah Q* is a penetrating portrayal of the working people of old China, and a synopsis of the history of oppression of the Chinese nation in modern times. It shows deep sympathy for the cruel servitude of people like Ah Q, Whiskers Wang, Amah Wu and others. It expresses great distress at the self-degrading, self-deriding method of winning a moral victory used by the oppressed, and lashes severely at such reactionaries as Old Mr. Chao, the successful county candidate, the Imitation Foreign Devil and others who lorded it over the Chinese people. It is a work of high patriotism and revolutionary realism.

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Introduction

I have been wanting to write Ah Q's true story for several years. But all the time that I wanted to write I kept vacillating, showing quite clearly that I am not one of those who achieve glory by writing; for an immortal pen has always been required to record the deeds of an immortal man, by this means the man becoming known to posterity through the writing and the writing known to posterity through the man—until finally it is impossible to tell which depends more on the other to be known to fame. But in the end I always came back to the idea of writing the story of Ah Q, as if there were a devil goading me on to do so.

And yet when I had decided to write this soon-to-be-forgotten story, no sooner had I taken up my

pen than I became conscious of insurmountable difficulties. The first was the question of what to call the work. Confucius said, "If the name is not correct, the words will not ring true"; and this axiom should be most carefully observed. There are many types of biographies: official biographies, autobiographies, authenticated biographies, legends, supplementary biographies, family histories, sketches...but unfortunately none of these suited my purpose. "Official biography"? This account will obviously not be included with those of many eminent people in some authentic history. "Autobiography"? But I am obviously not Ah Q. If I were to call this an "unauthorised biography," then where is his "authenticated biography"? The use of "legend" is impossible, because Ah Q was no legendary figure. "Supplementary biography"? But no president has ever ordered the National Historical Institute to write a "standard life" of Ah Q. It is true that although there are no "lives of gamblers" in authentic English history, the famous author Conan Doyle nevertheless wrote "Rodney Stone"; but while this is permissible for a famous author it is not permissible for such as I. Then there is "family history"; but I do not know whether I belong to the same family as Ah Q or not, nor have I ever been entrusted with such a task by his children or grandchildren. If I were to use "sketch,"

it might be objected that Ah Q has no "complete account." In short, this is really a "life," but since I write in a vulgar style using the language of porters and peddlers, I dare not presume to give it so high-sounding a title; so from the stock phrase of the less reputable novelists: "After this digression let us return to the *true story*," I will take the last two words as my title; and if this is reminiscent of the "True Story of Calligraphy" of the ancients, it cannot be helped.

In the second place, after having decided on the type of biography the opening sentences should read something like this: "So-and-so, whose other name was so-and-so, was a native of such-and-such a place"; but I am not sure what Ah Q's surname was. On one occasion he seemed to have the surname Chao, but the next day there was some confusion about the matter again. This was when Mr. Chao's son had passed the county official examination, and resounding gongs were announcing his success to the village; Ah Q had just drunk two bowls of yellow wine, and he said with a swagger that this reflected credit on him too, since he belonged to the same clan as Mr. Chao, and by an exact reckoning he was three generations senior to the successful candidate. At the time several of his listeners even began to stand slightly in awe of him. But the next day the bailiff summoned Ah Q

to Mr. Chao's house, where no sooner did the old gentleman set eyes on him than his face turned red with fury and he roared:

"Ah Q, you miserable wretch! Did you say I belonged to the same clan as you?"

Ah Q made no reply.

The longer Mr. Chao looked at him the angrier he became, and advancing menacingly a few steps he said, "How dare you talk such nonsense! How could I have such a relative as you? Is your surname Chao?"

Ah Q made no reply, his idea being to retreat; but Mr. Chao darted forward and gave him a slap on the face.

"How could your name be Chao!—Do you think you are worthy of the name Chao!"

Ah Q made no attempt to defend his right to the name Chao, but rubbing his left cheek he went out with the bailiff; and outside, after a torrent of abuse from the bailiff, he showed his gratitude to the latter by giving him two hundred cash. All who knew of this said Ah Q was a great fool to ask for a beating like that; his surname probably was not Chao, but even if it were, he should have known better than to boast like that since there was a Mr. Chao living there. After this no further mention was made of Ah Q's ancestry, so that I am still ignorant as to his real surname.

In the third place, I do not know either how Ah Q's personal name should be written. During his lifetime everybody called him Ah Quei, but after his death not a soul mentioned Ah Quei again; for how could he be one of those whose name is "preserved on bamboo tablets and silk"; or if it is a question of preserving his name, this essay must be the first attempt at doing so. Hence I am confronted with this difficulty at the outset. I have given the question careful thought: Ah Quei—would that be the "Quei" meaning cassia or the "Quei" meaning nobility? If his other name had been Moon Pavilion, or if he had celebrated his birthday in the month of the Moon Festival, then it would certainly be the *Quei* for cassia.* But since he had no other name—or if he had, no one knew it—and since he never sent out invitations on his birthday to secure complimentary verses: to write Ah Quei (cassia) would be too arbitrary. Again, if he had had an elder or younger brother called Ah Fu (prosperity), then he would certainly be called Ah Quei (nobility); but again, he was all on his own: thus to write Ah Quei (nobility) would also mean making an unwarranted assumption. All other unusual characters with the sound Quei are even less suitable. I once put this

* The cassia blooms in the month of the Moon Festival. Also, according to Chinese folklore, it is believed that the shadow on the moon is that of a cassia tree.

question to Mr. Chao's son, the successful county candidate, but even such a learned man as he was baffled by it. According to him, however, because Chen Tu-hsiu had brought out the magazine *New Youth*, advocating the use of the Western alphabet, the national culture was going to the dogs, and therefore this could not be traced. As a last resort I asked someone from my district to go and look up the legal documents recording Ah Q's guilt, but after eight months he sent me a letter saying that there was no name anything like Ah Quei in those records. Although uncertain whether this was the truth or whether he had done nothing about it, still, after failing to trace the name this way I had no other means of finding it. Since I am afraid the new system of phonetics has not yet come into common use, there is nothing for it but to use the Western alphabet, writing the name according to English spelling as Ah Quei and abbreviating it to Ah Q. This approximates to following the *New Youth* magazine blindly, and I am thoroughly ashamed of myself, but since such a learned man as Mr. Chao's son could not give me the solution to my problem, what else can I do?

In the fourth place, there is the question of Ah Q's place of origin. Assuming his surname to be Chao, then according to the old custom which still prevails of classifying people by their districts, one

might look up the commentary on the book *Different Surnames* and find "A native of Tien Shui in Kansu Province," but unfortunately Ah Q's surname is not definitely known, with the result that his place of origin must also remain uncertain. Although he lived for the most part in Weichuang, he often stayed in other places, so that it would be wrong to call him a native of Weichuang. It would in fact amount to a breach of historical canons.

What I console myself with is the fact that the character "Ah" is absolutely correct. This is definitely not the result of false analogy, and is well able to stand the test of scholarly criticism. As for the other problems, they are not such as unlearned people like myself can solve, and I only hope that historians and antiquaries like the followers of Hu Shih may be able in future to throw new light on them; however I am afraid that by that time my *True Story of Ah Q* will already have passed into oblivion.

The foregoing may be considered as an introduction.

A Brief Account of Ah Q's Victories

In addition to the uncertainty regarding Ah Q's surname, personal name, and place of origin, there is even some uncertainty regarding his "background." This is because the people of Weichuang only made use of his services or treated him as a laughing-stock, without ever paying the slightest attention to his "background." Ah Q himself remained silent on this subject, except that when quarrelling with someone he might glance at him and say, "We used to be much better off than you! What do you think you are?"

Ah Q had no family but lived in the Tutelary God's Temple at Weichuang. He had no fixed employment either, simply doing odd jobs for others: if there were wheat to be cut he would cut

it, if there were rice to be ground he would grind it, if there were a boat to be punted he would punt it. Should the work last for a considerable period he might stay in the house of his temporary employer, but as soon as it was finished he would leave. Thus whenever people had work to be done they would remember Ah Q, but what they remembered was his service and not his "background"; and by the time the job was done even Ah Q himself would be forgotten, to say nothing of his "background." Once indeed an old man praised him saying, "What a good worker Ah Q is!" At that time Ah Q, stripped to the waist, listless and lean, was standing before him, and other people did not know whether the remark was meant seriously or derisively, but Ah Q was overjoyed.

Ah Q, again, had a very high opinion of himself; he looked down on all the inhabitants of Weichuang, thinking even the two young "scholars" not worth a smile, though most young scholars were likely to pass the official examinations. Mr. Chao and Mr. Chen were held in great respect by the villagers, for in addition to being rich, they were both the fathers of young scholars, and Ah Q alone showed no sign of exceptional deference toward them, thinking to himself, "My sons may be much greater!"

Moreover, after Ah Q had been to the town several times, he naturally became even more conceited, although at the same time he looked down greatly on the townspeople. For instance, a bench made of a wooden plank three feet by three inches the Weichuang villagers called a "long bench," and he called it a "long bench" too; but the townspeople called it a "straight bench," and he thought, "This is wrong. How ridiculous!" Again, when they fried large-headed fish in oil the Weichuang villagers all added scallion leaves sliced half an inch long, whereas the townspeople added finely shredded scallions and he thought again, "This is wrong too. How ridiculous!" But the Weichuang villagers are really ignorant rustics who have never seen the fried fish of the town!

Ah Q who "used to be much better off," who was a man of the world and "a good worker," would have been almost the perfect man had it not been for a few unfortunate physical blemishes. The most annoying consisted of some places on his scalp where in the past, at some uncertain date, shiny ringworm scars had appeared. Although these were on his own head, apparently Ah Q did not consider them as altogether honourable, for he refrained from using the word "ringworm" or any words that sounded anything like it. Later he improved on this, making "bright" and "light" for-